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A Brief Study of the Medal, Its Origin and Early Development

BY

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Fig. 34. Breast-plate of Lord Brooke, about 1645. Sir Sibbald David Scott's "British Army," Vol. I, page 463, Figs. 35 and 36. Leonello d'Este, Marriage Medal, by Pisanello. (Size, 4 inches.)

A BRIEF STUDY OF THE MEDAL, ITS ORIGIN AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT.

T. L. COMPARETTE, PH.D.

(Read to the Numismatic and Antiquarian Society of Philadelphia, December 19, 1907.)

The commemorative medal has experienced greater vicissitudes of fortune than perhaps any other branch of art. Certainly no other art has stood in higher favor at one time, and again sunk to lower degrees of disfavor than has this very interesting branch of sculpture. It was in the luxurious, though petty, courts of northern Italy that the medal was first produced, and there it was fostered and admired by king and court and brought to perfection by the master hands of painter and sculptor; but it was quickly debased and degraded, and even its real character forgotten in the ignoble productions of subsequent ages. If it be said that the medal only shared the common misfortune of all the arts in the Seventeenth Century, on the other hand it must be admitted that none of the rest of them sank so low as the medal and, above all, that the medal did not participate with them in the recovery of some of their former great estate. For it remained for the appreciative sense of a later generation to perceive what the medal had been, what it might become, and finally to restore it, then a mean thing in a mean use, to an object of artistic beauty in a beautiful service. But this restoration to its former position among the arts has not yet fully come to the medal; in some parts of the world, in our own country for instance, it has only begun.

The statement that the medal originated in northern Italy in the Fifteenth Century might not escape challenge, in view of the existence of certain medallic works of earlier, even ancient, origin that bear no slight resemblance to the well known commemorative medal. It is, therefore, proper that attention be directed first to the possible precursors of the works of the Sesti and especially of the great painter medallist, Antonio Pisanello.

The medal, in the sense of a metallic disc with a relief on both sides and not intended for use as money, but solely to commemo-

rate a person or an event, was quite unknown to the Greeks. Was it also unknown to the Romans? Such a question brings up for consideration the medallions of the Roman emperors and the so-called contorniates. I do not believe that it will take us too far afield from the course of our main discussion to devote a few minutes of our time to these very interesting pieces and briefly to certain questions that are connected with them. Few numismatic works, if, indeed, any, have caused more discussion than the Roman medallion and contorniate. Numerous theories have been set forth to explain their purpose, but up to the present time no explanation has been offered that is acceptable to the majority of scholars who have given the subject their careful attention.

The large Roman medallions, as they are conveniently called, simply on account of their large size and without intention of describing their real character, were issued only under the empire. As the splendid specimen in gold in the Naples Museum attests, the series began with Augustus; and known specimens show that they were issued down to about the end of the Western Empire. They were struck in bronze, silver and gold. Bronze medallions were issued by the Senate as well as by the emperors, though specimens bearing the letters "S C" (*senatus consultu*) and showing that, like the bronze coins, they were issued by the authority of the Senate, are not numerous. The silver and gold medallions, it might be added among these statements intended to refresh your memories, were struck in multiples of the standard gold and silver coins. Gold medallions are known or referred to by ancient writers¹ with a value ranging from four to one hundred *aurei*. The medallions of the earlier emperors are comparatively rare, and the number issued down to the close of the First Century of our era was probably small, while their number and artistic excellence were greatly increased under the Antonines. After the principate of Commodus, issues of these pieces became less and less frequent, and with the decline in numbers goes, hand in hand, a steady declension of their artistic merits.

The obverse type of the medallions is always a portrait head, or bust, of the emperor or empress. The types of the reverse

¹*Historiæ Augustæ Scrip., Severi Alex.:—Formas binarias, ternarias et * * * * * usque ad bilibres quoque et centenarias * * **
præcepit neque in usu cuiusquam versari.

are considerably varied, yet certain of them recur frequently, though with minor changes of details. We find among the reverse types, for instance, an *allocutio* (the emperor addressing his soldiers), a chariot, a deity, as Hercules, symbolical of manly qualities (*virtus*), Victory, and other similar designs.

In stating thus some of the salient features of these medallions, though only to refresh your memories, I am perhaps carrying owls to Athens. But if unnecessary, the statements are also brief, and a little superfluity is not intolerable.

As has been already stated no satisfactory explanation has ever been given of the real purpose of these Roman medallions. And while we are now concerned only with the question of whether they could possibly have been intended as commemorative medals, we shall not find it devoid of interest for the present theme, if our attention be called to some of the other explanations of them that have been advanced. The ancient writers unfortunately give us no clue to the solution of the problem; and the numerous theories that have been set forth by modern investigators have been based solely upon the uses to which some of the pieces have been apparently put, as shown by the present condition of certain of them. Such evidence is, of course, wholly unsafe, and conclusions drawn therefrom are bound to be unconvincing. Coins and medals, especially portrait pieces, are constantly put to uses for which they were never intended. Thus, because numerous specimens of a special issue of coins bearing the portrait of a much loved king are found provided with a loop, and the reverses are also abraded more than the obverse with its portrait, it would be absurd to infer that that special issue was intended to be worn as amulets or ornaments by the subjects or friends of the monarch. It could only be inferred that many of them had been so used. Now, from just such evidence, it has been sought to show that the large Roman medallions were intended to be inserted into the standards of the army as symbols of loyalty and objects of worship. For instance, the reverses of some of the silver medallions are much abraded and appear to have been attached rather loosely to a hard object which in motion would cause them to move; some others have heavy ornate collars which rendered them suitable for mounting; while still others in gold and bronze are found with a loop by which they were suspended from a chain. That imperial medallions may have been inserted into the military standards and even attached

to the sides of their shafts it is unnecessary to deny ; for undoubtedly the standards generally did bear an image of the emperor. That the presence of the imperial image was by law required upon them does not appear. On the other hand, it would have been clever, and withal very natural, for the soldier thus to place conspicuously the portrait of the emperor to whom he had sworn allegiance, and to whom especially he paid divine honors. For this purpose a large Sestertius, or still better, a larger medallion, would answer very nicely, and almost certainly both were so employed. But, that some of them were used in camp for that purpose is no proof that they were specially intended for that use, and it is even more improbable that the silver medallion in particular was so intended, as has been forcefully contended ; for the Roman soldier, as well as the modern type, had a quick eye and a ready hand for easily garnered treasures.

Dismissing this and similar theories that are based largely upon the condition of the extant pieces, it remains to look at the most obvious question, whether the medallions are coins or medals, since, to many, it appears that they must be one or the other.

In favor of regarding them as belonging to the monetary system of the country is the fact that Latin writers, in the few instances in which they refer to them, refer to the large silver and gold medallions in monetary terms, styling them multiples of the standard unit. This evidence, further supported by the fact that these large pieces actually are struck in multiples of the gold and silver unit, seems to point conclusively to their being really luxurious coins of large size and superior artistic treatment. But here, too, there is need of caution. For both the terms employed by the ancient writers and the weight of the pieces may be only a convenience. For, not uncommonly to-day are commemorative medals made in some definite multiple of a coinage unit. Besides, the fact that the silver medallions of the Second Century and later are of superior fineness to the debased coins of the same period is an insuperable objection to considering the former as coins of high denomination. This last objection cannot be urged against the possible monetary character of the gold pieces, because neither they nor the gold coins contain an alloy. But, if the silver medallions are to be excluded from the coinage, then the gold and bronze pieces are likewise excluded.

In denying to the Roman medallions the various other purposes that have been ascribed to them, and in particular a monetary

character, it might seem that we are bound to accept the only other apparent alternative, and that is, that they are really commemorative medals. But even against this proposition at least two serious, if not insuperable, objections can be urged. In the first place, as Eckhel pointed out, the reverse types are not in any real sense commemorative. This objection applies as well to the inscriptions as to the scene represented; for none of the inscriptions relate to any event or refer to the subject of the obverse portrait in a way to suggest a memorial. An objector might say that the reverse types of some of the medallions are as easily interpreted in a commemorative sense as are some of the weak and far-fetched allegorical scenes on certain of the medals of Sperandio and other medallists. But a comparison between the most favorable examples of the medallions and the least successful specimens of real medals could establish nothing for the whole class of the former. The second objection to their memorial character is, to my mind, even more convincing. It is, that no such commemorative piece was needed by the Romans at the time the series of the medallions began. The commemorative coin was well known already in the time of Augustus, and the institution of the new coinage by that emperor with the large brass sesterlius as an important member of the series made it practically impossible for the need of a special memorial piece to become felt. Subsequently under the very emperors who made most of the medallion, the commemorative coin was by far the most frequently issued. One who is acquainted with the coins of Trajan and Hadrian will hardly be able to see how either of them would ever require a special medal as a memorial of anything in their lives; for apparently no event of importance in their principates escape record upon their coins.

The perplexing problem of the purpose and meaning of the mis-called medallions still remains unsolved. I am aware that some eminent authorities have reached conclusions that are satisfactory to themselves at least and in some instances to a rather large following. In most cases the explanation is one or another of those that have been suggested. But none of the explanations is generally accepted; and least of all does the notion that the medallions are really memorial pieces find favor. For our purposes that is the most important observation.

I shall not enter into the question of the Roman contorniates, medallic pieces still more unusual and problematic than the medal-

lions. There seems to be a general drift of opinion toward the belief that they were used for draughtsmen in some kind of game. The reasoning by which that conclusion is reached is not very convincing; but the explanation will do to rest upon until a better one is found, provided no catalogue-maker has the temerity to enter them as draughtsmen. One can tolerate a theory, however absurd, so long as it remains a theory only. But, though nobody longer thinks of these contorniates as in any sense commemorative medals, still they are suggested in connection with the medal because of their size, style of treatment, and chiefly because they are far removed from any possible connection with the coinage.

It is many centuries after the destruction of Roman civilization before we again meet with anything akin to the medal. A few coins of memorial character struck during the Middle Ages cannot be considered exceptions to the general statement. And it is not until the beginning of the Fifteenth Century that there was produced at Padua a number of pieces which, though perhaps themselves a product of a revived interest in antique coins, suggested in turn the modern commemorative medal, a work of art entirely independent of its immediate predecessor so far as style of treatment is concerned—in fact, a new branch of art.

Not only the medal itself but also its peculiar development within an extremely brief space of time, are natural expressions of two powerful influences that marked the revival of learning and letters in the Fifteenth Century. These were the influence of the antique, and in this particular instance the influence of ancient Roman portrait coins; and secondly, the feeling of man's individual importance among the members of society. Interest in ancient coins, in particular Roman coins bearing the splendid portraits of the emperors, had already been started and stimulated by Petrarch. And his letters show that his chief concern was not with purely numismatic questions, nor with financial affairs, nor even with the art of the engravers, but almost solely with the subject of the portrait—a purely historical interest. That the coin presented the likeness of the emperor, and thus helped to keep alive the fame of his great personality and splendid achievements, made a deep impression on Petrarch's mind. That their appeal to him should take this form was perfectly natural; for it emphasized the personal dignity of the emperor. And the sense of personal dignity, of individuality (newly awak-

ened and, in recoil as it were from the class life of the Middle Ages, exceedingly vivid in the Italian mind), was the second and really the important influence that brought the medal into existence and popularity. For, this new feeling of individual dignity almost immediately gave rise to a potent desire among men to leave in the world some artistic or literary memorial that would survive them and transmit to posterity the record of their fame, or, at least, their name. The Horatian *non omnis moriar* became a general determination. This absorbing desire of posthumous glory was perhaps the most powerful influence in the production of that tumultuously rich culture of the Italian Renaissance. The pursuit of learning and literature, the practice of the arts, or the patronizing of one or both of them, seem to have enlisted the deep interest of nearly every man and woman of the better classes. And in all this cultural activity the thought of posterity was not lost sight of amid the immediate pleasure of creative work and applause. It was to serve this longing for imperishable memorials that the convenient medal was invented.

The suitability of the medal for that purpose was at once plainly apparent. First its comparatively small cost placed it within the reach of many who could not attempt an imposing monument. Again the destruction of ancient works of art for the sake of their materials was a matter of personal observation on every hand, and the records of similar vandalisms, in the centuries just past, naturally shook the world-old faith in the perdurable character of man's work in bronze and stone. But the trifling value of the material in a medal would plainly protect it against destruction in the melting pot; and, made in numerous copies, it faced the future with more than a single chance of being preserved.

It is the influence of Roman coins that predominates in the first real medals. These were the medals of the two members of the Carrara family, tyrants of Padua, and intended to commemorate the re-taking of that city by Francesco II in 1390. The two pieces are in almost pure classic style and closely resemble the Roman brass sestertii. The portraits are done precisely in the manner of the portraits of Roman emperors. The reverse type, the same on both medals, is little more than an ornament, being simply a car, in allusion to the name of the family, Carrara. These medals are not signed, and it is not known from other sources

who produced them; but it has been aptly suggested that they may have been the work of some members of the Sesti family, long engravers to the Venetian mint. Their only importance is to mark the birth, at about 1400 A. D., of the notion of producing a purely commemorative piece in the general form of the coin, but in treatment and size utterly different from any coins then made for circulation. Happily the unknown artists apparently received no further commissions and had no imitators. For that reason these pieces need receive no further attention here. And for similar reasons, another group of large medals of Constantine the Great, and of Heraclius, may be here passed over. They are plainly the work of clever and painstaking goldsmiths; and the suggestion that they belonged to a series beginning with Augustus and including all the Roman emperors whose principates were marked by important events in the history of Christianity may be accepted.² It was the splendid achievement of a consummate master that the influence of the antique was dropped, and the still less happy manner of the goldsmith was avoided, and the real modern medal began its career as a perfect expression of the contemporary taste, style, and power of expression.

For convenience the subsequent development of the medal will be considered under the two headings of the Cast Medal and the Struck Medal. This division is somewhat arbitrary, as I shall endeavor to show when we come to consider the struck medal; but it is more convenient than a mere dating of the changes in the medal, which partly resulted from a change of the process of production, and partly made the different process possible.

The earlier medals, those of Pisanello, who began the practice, and of his successors, down into the Sixteenth Century were cast. It was the only process whereby a large piece could be produced at that time, owing to the small capacity of the regular stamping machinery in use. This proved most fortunate for the new art; because in the process of casting the artist secured a freedom that made possible really monumental work. The moulds placed no restrictions either upon the size of the piece, or upon the height of the relief. And, besides, there was the added advantage of producing the original model in wax instead

²Hill, Pisanello, p. 101.

of engraving it in soft iron, the prevailing method of making coin dies.³

The artist with whose works the history of the modern commemorative medal began, the medallist whose conception of the medal came to be accepted, was Antonio Pisanello of Verona. He was a painter by profession and was famous in his lifetime as a portraitist. How he happened to turn his hand to a branch of art so far removed from the one he pursued, is I believe, now unknown. It was fortunate perhaps that his training had been in a different branch of art from that on which his most enduring fame was destined to rest; though he himself highly esteemed his art of painting, and apparently viewed his medallic works as of secondary importance. He styled himself PICTOR on his medals. His medals are famous, his paintings are but very little known. Such sport of Fate, however, is not uncommon. Trained as a painter and imbued with the spirit of the art of his own time, Pisanello seems to have known nothing of the traditions of the medallic art. He was thus free from the dead hand of those traditions, from the influence of the antique, and he was also especially free from the limitations and mannerisms of the gem-engraver and of the goldsmith. And he was also untrammelled in another important respect: as a pioneer in a new branch of art, and virtually its inventor, his patron was not in a position to offer suggestions which he must in a measure respect. His subject, who, himself, was also ordering his medal made, could not pose as something of a connoisseur, and above all he could not point to another medal and request that his be somewhat like it. For, it is but fair to infer that many of the copies and imitations found among the works of later medallists were in large part due to the caprices of the subjects themselves, and not wholly to the artists. Thus it happened that the first real master

³The sources of this brief study are the Italian medals described and illustrated in the various large collections, aided in some instances by reproductions of the medals. The principal of these are the following well known works:

Friedlander. *Die Italienischen Schaumuenzen des fuenfzenten Jahrhunderts.*

Heiss. *Les Medailleurs de la Renaissance.*

Keary. *British Museum Catalogue of Italian Medals.*

Hill. *Pisanello.*

Fabriczy. *Italian Medals.*

medallist was left completely to the exercise of his own creative powers.

Since the works of Pisanello are justly regarded by the ablest, if not by all, critics as the greatest masterpieces of the art, a brief examination of some of his most successful medals will at once afford us the pleasure of reviewing them and give us an approximately perfect standard by which to judge the works of his successors, and of the medal in general.

For this purpose I have selected three of his acknowledged masterpieces. I have chosen specimens whose reverse designs are the artist's own creation, the subject having, at the most, indicated the general idea he desired the medal to express. For, of course, the medals which present on the reverse a personal or family device, a subject ready to hand, may only show the artist's skill in execution.

Among the several medals which Pisanello made for Leonello D'Este is one (Figs. 35 and 36) that refers to the marriage of the young marquis to Maria of Aragon in 1444. Of the portrait of Leonello one can say what may be said of nearly all of the portraits by this master, that it is almost faultless. To modern eyes the presentation may seem a little too severe, as indeed the portraits by Pisanello evidently did appear to Goethe and his contemporaries. But the very simplicity and the nobleness of the splendidly modelled features are, after our better acquaintance with Greek art, bound to force their appeal upon any receptive mind. Thus convinced, I shall not devote any attention to details, especially since I am aware of your own abilities to judge for yourselves, and feel my own critical incapacities in the presence of such artistic excellence. Let me here merely call your attention to the inscription, to the horizontal lines, and to the G(ener) R(egis) AR(agonum) in the large field above the head; for we shall consider the general subject of handling the inscriptions in connection with another medal.

In a beautiful allegory the scene on the reverse alludes to Leonello's happiness in his marriage. A powerful lion, Italian *leone*, a play on the same name Leone-llo, with evident manifestations of pleasure sings from a scroll held by a cupid. It is, of course, a love song, a marriage song, he is singing. Note how every semblance of natural savagery is wanting. We have instead the peaceful attitude of a domestic animal; his fierce spirit, of course, being completely subjugated by the power of love. Yet the artist

would impress upon us that this is no tame, captive lion, but a fierce monarch of the forest subdued by the master passion in his own fastnesses; hence the wild and rocky waste and the eagle perched upon the nearby tree. The pillar with the mast, a device of Leonello's, and the date, if it does not conform to the conventionalities of good composition, in no wise spoils a good composition, nor injure the general effect. The whole scene is grandly conceived and executed with the power of a master hand. But it is the *aptness* of the allegory to the purpose of the medal as much as the individual excellence of the reverse type itself that is noteworthy. For we may have a perfect portrait on the obverse of a medal, and on the reverse an ever so artistic representation, and still have a very imperfect medal. And instances of this want of harmony between the sides are very numerous. The perfection of a medal depends largely upon the harmony between the two sides, upon the nice interpretation of its specific purpose by an artistically represented scene on the reverse. It is evident that the wedlock between the two parts of this marriage medal is perfect.

Another masterpiece of Pisanello's is the medal of Cecelia Gonzaga (Figs. 37 and 38), daughter of Gianfrancesco, the first marquis of Mantua. The medal was made in 1447, when Cecelia was twenty-one years old. If, as is probably true, she had taken the veil a year or two before the date of the medal, it was probably made to carry out the pretty whim of a proud father, at the time deceased. For one who had retired from the world to a convent would hardly have any desire for such a memorial. Cecelia had been for years a pupil of the renowned humanist, Vittorino da Feltre, and had been an unusually successful student of Greek and Latin. But it was the sweet innocence of the maiden and not her accomplishments in humanistic studies that is celebrated by the medal.

The peculiar fashion of an artificially high forehead and long nape produce a strange effect, yet closer scrutiny leaves no room to mistake the best efforts of the artist in the portrait, and that is the extent of our interest just now. For it is Pisanello's conception of the medal as a whole that we are now trying to study, and not his skill in portraiture. The reverse presents a scene intended to be symbolical of innocence. In a rocky desert place a unicorn lies peacefully while a young virgin seated by his head fearlessly lays her hand upon his long, strong horn. On the other

side of the composition and nicely balancing the upright form of the girl, stands a cippus with signature and date, while in the distance hangs the crescent moon. It is but necessary to recall the myth of the unicorn, the animal that could be captured only by a virgin, to perceive how suitable is the scene as a symbol of innocence. To reinforce the idea, the moon, likewise a symbol of innocence, is introduced as a minor symbol; and also without doubt to enhance the notion of the remoteness and loneliness of the scene. And this latter notion of remoteness from the haunts of man may be further intended to suggest the seclusion of Cecelia in the convent. For once secure of his main idea the artist was at liberty to enlarge upon his conception beyond the strict limits of his chief purpose, provided he did not go to the extent of making discordant and distracting additions. But it is the positive suggestion of innocence, not alone of mere freedom from the sensual, in a fourfold manner, in the severe landscape, the pure moon, the mythical animal, and not less in the person of the young girl—and the manner in which her hair is dressed shows that she is a very young girl—that most interests us, because it exhibits again Pisanello's fine sense of the suitability of reverse design to the main intention of the medal.

Some four or five years after the last mentioned medal was made, Pisanello made a series of three medals for Alfonso I of Naples, styled the Magnanimous. To one of these, dated 1449, and intended to celebrate the kingly magnanimity of Alfonso, the LIBERALITAS AUGUSTA medal, I beg leave to call your attention.

The obverse presents the mailed bust of Alfonso, with his helmet behind him and, balancing that, his crown in front. The disposition of the date in three lines above and below the low crown cleverly ekes out that symbol till it occupies almost the same amount of space the helmet does. Thus the date is converted from a possibly awkward or obscure addition to a really ornamental feature. With the same skill the name and titles of the king are so disposed above and below the bust as to make the whole conform to the circular shape of the medal.

It was the intention to discuss briefly at this point Pisanello's methods of handling the inscriptions, and also the style of lettering he employed. But for obvious reasons that purpose will have to be abandoned. Let it suffice to say that the inscription never appears to intrude awkwardly into his designs. When he





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- Figs. 37 and 38. Cecelia Gonzagna, by Pisanello. (Size, $3\frac{3}{8}$ inches.)
 Fig. 39. Reverse of Medal of Sigismondo Malatesta, by de Pasti. (Size, $3\frac{1}{4}$ inches.)
 Fig. 40. Reverse of Medal of Jacopo Trotti (Sperandio). (Size, $1\frac{3}{4}$ inches.)

can not make it a really happy element of his composition he has generally succeeded in placing it in the field where it does not in the least affect the design.

The reverse of this medal is another happy allegory. An eagle, which has captured some prey, is perched upon the stub of a tree and round about stand several hungry birds of prey which, not being successful in their search for game, are now patiently waiting until the eagle shall have eaten and generously left them a portion of his capture. It was the belief, which still obtains in some parts of the world, that the eagle never devoured all his prey but always left a part of it for less fortunate birds or animals. How the scene portrayed the king's magnanimous qualities, or sentiments, is very evident. It flatteringly presents him as a masterful spirit always able to conquer and win his own desires, and then ever ready to come to the aid of the strong but less successful about him.

These three medals are enough to give some notion of Pisanello's mastery of the art, and above all his view of the essential character of the medal. His superior skill in portraiture, in composition, and in the handling of details, was a matter of genius, but certain principles of the medal which he plainly held were easily mastered. And it is from the standpoint of how these principles were applied that we are studying the medal rather than of artistic excellence.

The conception of the medal and, in no mean measure the standard of excellence, established by Pisanello was consciously aimed at and approximately realized by de Pasti, a contemporary who succeeded him as the virtual court medallist of several of the petty princes of northern Italy. The few medals that he made are of the large size which Pisanello found best adapted for superior workmanship; and his style, likewise, aimed at the same simplicity and severity that characterized the work of his master, who may have been his teacher, too. In his medal of the eminent humanist, Guarino, de Pasti surpassed any of his other efforts and really rivalled Pisanello's best portraiture, so excellent indeed is the work that many have suspected it of being done after a painted portrait from the brush of Pisanello. His real masterpiece, however, is the medal of Sigismondo Malatesta, the reverse of which (Fig. 39) is his own beyond a doubt, and is a noble achievement. It presents the great Malatesta temple at Rimini. I know of no other example of the representation of

an architectural piece upon a medal that is comparable with this one. The splendid structure stands out in monumental grandeur and without a single unpleasing line. One must compare it with similar efforts on some of the Roman coins and on certain modern medals to realize how successful it is. De Pasti was trained as an architect as well as a painter, and it is that double training that probably accounts for this notable success.

The representation of an actual structure of any sort upon the reverse of a medal intended as a memorial to its subject was in this case introduced for the first time. Pisanello presented the sentiment desired in the form of an allegory and by means of the personal device then so common and which expressed pictorially what the more usual motto of to-day does verbally. Thus we have here an interesting departure and one that was to undergo an enormous development at a later period. Such reverse types had been employed for Roman commemorative coins, of which the representation of the Coliseum on a large bronze coin of Titus is a familiar example; and during the last century architectural reverses have become very common. There is this marked difference, however, between these later works and our medal of Malatesta: the former almost without exception have to do primarily with the structure, celebrating its completion, repair, or dedication, with the portrait of the architect, or founder, or, in case of a church, of some high prelate, added as little more than a decoration for what is really the reverse side; while this medal by de Pasti was purely a personal memorial of Malatesta as a promoter of the arts.

It is plainly impossible in a brief study, such as this, to take up the works of all the masters of the Renaissance, or of a majority of them. It is likewise not desirable, especially since it is possible to select artists whose works are typical, and show the general tendency.

Among the large number of medallists who were successors of Pisanello and de Pasti, perhaps none is more important for our purpose than Sperandio of Mantua. His view of the medal is approximately the same as that of his numerous contemporaries.

Pisanello died in 1455 and Sperandio, who was born in 1425, produced his first medal in 1460, making him thus a younger contemporary of the great Veronese master. He is specially interesting because of the great popularity he enjoyed, which brought him numerous, perhaps too many, commissions; and then

because of the high rank assigned him by the earliest modern critics of the Renaissance master, Goethe and his friends. Thus at two widely separated periods he has exercised a powerful influence upon this branch of art. In view of this fact and of the large number of his works he should have more attention than will here be given him.

It will perhaps be just as well to give first Goethe's opinion, which ranked him as the greatest of the medallists, placing him above Pisanello and de Pasti. Goethe considered Sperandio's portraits of superior excellence, and specially praised the pictorial taste shown in the composition of his reverses. Latter day critics are inclined to discover that Goethe was wrong in a good many things, and in none did he blunder more singularly than in this estimate. Evidently Sperandio stood on the same level in the downward course of the art, that Goethe had reached in the improvement of taste for it. Thus the artist and the connoisseur could clasp hands. To-day the connoisseur has climbed up to Pisanello, but the artist is far below. Or it may be that Goethe had before him only a comparatively small number of the medals of Sperandio, and those his best efforts, and at the same time did not have the works of the earlier masters which he had imitated or copied.

Apart from a lot of dry and lifeless portraits, though a few of his portraits are really fine, the important feature of Sperandio's work is his evident feeling that the reverse was of minor importance. Not only do we seldom discover any pertinent significance in his reverses, but equally seldom can one perceive any effort to compose a reverse scene that will give meaning to his medal. He showed a tendency to regard the reverse as what it always was to the Florentine medallists, namely, a back that must receive a decoration. He left us some excellent exceptions, but they are exceptions. Thus his medal of Count Grati, which bears, by the way, one of Sperandio's very best efforts at portraiture, has for a reverse design an awkward combination of two of Pisanello's fine reverses, those of the Novello Malatesta and Gianfrancesco Gonzaga medals. Again he decorated the reverse of the medal of Francesco Sforza of Milan, which is a poor work otherwise, with de Pasti's splendid representation of the Malatesta Temple. Such procedure proves more than decadence of taste, it points toward a change in the essential character of the medal.

For some of his medals Sperandio composed allegorical scenes,

many of which the critics have denounced as tasteless. This they are, and sometimes in the very broad sense of lacking any discoverable meaning that will throw light upon the particular personal quality which the medal was meant to illustrate. One of his allegories forms the reverse of the medal of Jacopo Trotti, a statesman and the prime minister of Ercole I of Ferrara (Fig. 40). A naked, bearded man stands with his left foot upon a prostrate monstrosity of an animal, and in his right hand holds an upraised dagger!

These confessedly indifferent specimens of Sperandio's works are not presented as typical of all his medals, but as showing a decided tendency in the development of the conception of the medal. And this tendency to underrate the importance of the reverse is found among other artists as we approach the Sixteenth Century. Thus one of the five medals made by so excellent an artist as Cellini has no reverse design, and another of them is not much richer for the design it bears.

It is not my purpose to follow the course of the medallic art in its spread to all the various art centers of Italy and then throughout Europe. Such historical matter does not fall within the scope of this paper. We are concerned henceforth with only certain vicissitudes of its development, some of which were, however, due to local influences, chiefly in Italy. This was particularly true of Florence, one of the first places to which this new branch of art made its way from the northern cities already mentioned.

Apart from the influences which Florence exercised upon the artistic treatment of the medal, there took place at that city a popularization of the art that is in some respects even more important for a survey of its development than any of the changes in its essential character. For, while in Verona, Ferrara, Mantua, and other northern cities of Italy the use of the medal was practically restricted to the ruling family and their entourage; in rich and luxurious Florence it found favor with all classes of distinguished persons, with scholars and artists, statesmen and soldiers, with both men and women: everybody had medals made of themselves. It might naturally be expected that with an enormous increase of commissions from wealthy patrons the art thus encouraged would make decided progress, or at least maintain the high level already gained for it. Such, however, was not the case. On the other hand, the work of the Florentine medallists is weak in one of the most essential particulars—the designing of the reverse.

One of the first, as well as one of the most interesting, of the artists who produced medals at Florence was Bertoldo di Giovanni (1420-1491), the eminent sculptor, and pupil of Donatello. Bertoldo's medals are perhaps not the best nor the most characteristic of the vast number made by Florentine artists; but a medal signed by a well-known artist is more satisfactory for our purpose than an anonymous work. For it is a source of great embarrassment to the student of Florentine medals that comparatively few of them are signed, though many of the unsigned pieces can be satisfactorily attributed. Bertoldo's medal of Mohammed II (Fig. 41), so desirable a specimen for study in many respects, presents, unfortunately, a portrait modelled after a painted portrait of the Emperor by Bellini. It may, therefore, be dismissed with the scant praise that it is evidently a faithful likeness of the Emperor, but it is very little more. The scene on the reverse is far less successful and very instructive, because representative of the reverses generally found on the Florentine medals. It presents the Emperor standing high upon a triumphal car which also bears three female figures in manacles, symbolical of the three provinces that had been recently conquered. Two reclining figures in the exergue probably refer to the Sultan's sway over land and sea. The style of the reverse, which is very different from what we have seen in the works of Pisanello and the other masters among his successors, is strongly marked by the influence of the antique. In fact, the whole scene is rendered after the manner familiar on large Roman coins. And the types of those coins are probably responsible for the favorite reverse designs among the medalists of Florence; that is, a female figure, or sometimes a group of two or three female figures, symbolical of the virtues or abstract notions, such as Nemesis, Fides, Spes, Fortuna, and similar personifications.

Another medallist of Florence, and one whose works are more numerous, and generally better esteemed than those of Bertoldo, was Nicolo Fiorentino. In my own opinion this master's medal of the young Pico della Mirandola is his greatest work. He seems to have lavished all the wealth of his undoubted skill upon the portrait of the young scholar. Fiorentino evidently aimed to make it a masterpiece and certainly would spare no time nor patience to attain that result. The reverse design which he provided for this medal is therefore of more than ordinary significance. For the reverse he has represented the well-known group of the Three

Graces, which is still to be seen in the Cathedral at Siena. The copy may not have been made from the group itself, but from a cameo which he probably knew of; but it is likely at least that the large work was familiar to him. There was no special significance in this group which made it, in the mind of the artist, justly appropriate for the reverse of a medal of Pico, for he employed the same design for other medals. He plainly uses the design as a purely decorative piece, simply preferring to ornament the reverse of the medal rather than leave it plain. The function of the reverse was entirely lost sight of, and its importance regarded as too small to deserve the effort of providing a monumental relief. But, if Fiorentino would spare no time with the reverse of Pico's medal, the same error, indolence or inability, cannot be charged against his efforts at portraiture. He has caught the essential features of the handsome young scholar's physiognomy and fixed them with entire success. It is not hard to see in that face one of the keenest minds of the Renaissance, "The Knight of the Intellect," as he has been very deservedly named.

This all too brief consideration of the medal's development at Florence will fittingly close with a reference to a few of the works of Pastorino. This artist belongs to the Sixteenth Century and is one of the last great medallists of Florence. The term "great medallist" must be understood in a qualified sense, for taken in the strict sense of the term, and as the medal was understood a century before and as it is now understood by the more discriminating, Pastorino was not really a medallist at all. His specialty was the portrait in low relief, for with few exceptions his medals have no reverse designs. He, in fact, undertook almost the identical rôle which the high-class photographer of to-day performs, that of making flattering portraits; and, like the latter, society leaders were Pastorino's chief patrons. But by his contemporaries, however, who, like himself, had an entirely incorrect notion of the real form and purpose of a medal, Pastorino was evidently regarded as one of the greatest medallists in Florence. For there exist nearly two hundred works by him, and many of them are of the most eminent men and women of his day. Thus the list includes medals of the painter, Titian; of the poet, Ariosto; of Cardinal d'Este, and of Margaret of Parma, to mention only a few of the best known personages who sat to this artist.



41

Fig. 41. Reverse of Medal of Mohammed II. (Bertoldo).
(Size, $2\frac{3}{4}$ inches.)



42



43

Figs. 42 and 43. Beatrice da Siena (Pastorino). (Size, $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches).

In a study of medallic portraits Pastorino would be one of the most interesting of the Italian medallists. His style is utterly different from that of the early works which we have admired. He came almost a century later and belongs to a different era of art; and one of the sources of interest in his portraits is the fact that they reflect contemporary ideals, which is always demanded of the coin and the medal. If Pastorino could model a powerful portrait, he chose not to do so, while apparently he always aimed to make them pretty, and generally succeeded in producing a work that would be pronounced charming. It was doubtless that quality of his work that brought him so many commissions from women.

One of Pastorino's best portraits is that of Titian. It is no better in most important respects than the portrait of Cardinal d'Este, and not so strong, on the other hand, as the one of Ariosto, but there is a naturalness in the pose of the head that distinguishes it above any other of the artist's efforts. It is a safe conjecture that the great painter himself had not a little to do with the success of his own medal. It is simply a portrait medallion with a plain reverse. For Pastorino, indeed, the medal had but one side; and the very few examples of his efforts at reverse designs do not form the least indication to the contrary. Thus his portrait of Beatrice da Siena (Figs. 42 and 43) is done with fastidious care and the result is a really fascinating presentation of both the features and gown of that unknown dame. The reverse is a very commonplace sort of decoration, simply filling up the field. And his efforts at more elaborate designs, as his strange and altogether tasteless allegory on the medal of Lollio, a distinguished scholar, may be considered a justification of his practice of generally omitting a reverse piece from his medals.

Medallic portraiture did not suffer at the hands of the Florentine artists. On the other hand, some of the most successful portraits on any of the Italian medals are to be found among the works produced at Florence. Their habit of concentrating their supreme efforts upon some essential features, well known among Florentine sculptors and painters, produced an effect specially adapted to medallic work.

But, as we have already seen, the case of the reverse was very different; and to a large extent the history of the development of the medal, of its rise and declension, is the history of the

treatment of the reverse. It is an error of early origin, as already noted, and one that still holds on, that the reverse is unimportant, or is less important than the obverse. Such a view of the medal is certainly incorrect, and a view that loses sight of the purpose it was intended to serve. For whether the medal be purely personal, like that of the Renaissance, or employed to commemorate an event, as so frequently it does in later times, in either case the reverse plays a rôle that is quite indispensable. Its part is, of course, to glorify the person represented on the obverse by means of a symbolical or historical scene suggestive of his notable quality or achievement, which warranted the preparation of the medal; or, in case of a medal celebrating an event, to present pictorially its heroic or beneficent character.

It is not the person nor the event as such that justify the existence of the memorial, but the relation, whether actual or imaginary, of them to humanity and history; and the cases are very exceptional when the medal is not ordered because of some particular relationship of the subject to his times or generation. Its significance is seldom of a general nature, and the narrow and special meaning of the medal is the function of the reverse to make plain. With this view of the reverse the medal becomes a perfect memorial and perfectly unified. The obverse and reverse are therefore of equal importance, as they certainly from the first were meant to be, and actually were, until a deficient artist managed to escape the task of creative work to which he was unequal by flattering, with an excellent portrait, the vanity of his patron into forgetting the other half of the work ordered.

This clear function of the reverse began, however, soon to be misunderstood and the result was weak and carelessly executed designs, and then a rapid declension to a plain reverse, or to the oft used modern makeshifts of a mere inscription. The piece with a plain reverse cannot properly be classed as a medal at all, and that with the inscribed reverse has no greater claim to the designation. The medal proper has little in common with the portrait tablet; and a portrait tablet with its explanatory inscription conveniently placed on the back is just what the medal becomes, when the interpretative scene of the reverse has been displaced by an inscription.

Several influences can be found which were at work in the latter part of the Fifteenth Century to destroy the true character of the reverse of the medal, or, if you will allow, to destroy the

medal itself. Lack of genius was, of course, the primary cause. When so many artists, painters, sculptors, and especially gem-engravers and goldsmiths, were accepting commissions to make medals, it was but natural that many of them should lack the intelligence and the skill in composition, if not in execution, to create a design that would be at once monumental in itself and reveal to the beholder the significance of the subject of the obverse, or, as in the case of the Italian medals of the Renaissance, simply glorify the person whose memorial it was. In particular I am sure that much of the damage is chargeable to the goldsmiths and gem-engravers, whose unsuitable training exercised an unfavorable influence upon the art. Their habit of elaborating minute details and the tendency to excessive ornament are often revealed in their portraits, while from sheer lack of training in a grand style of composition their reverse scenes, when such were even attempted, were weak and meaningless. The proportion of Italian medallists who were trained as goldsmiths or gem-engravers was large, and it is among their works that the lapses from high and true standards are most frequently found.

The line of demarcation between cast and struck medals cannot be so sharply drawn as might seem possible in view of the freedom the former process allowed the artist, and the restriction which the limited capacity of the most powerful stamping press then known imposed upon the size of the piece and the height of the relief. As a matter of fact, we have already seen that while the casting process was still in use, by a reduction in size, the use of lower relief, and finally by the debasement of the reverse relief with frequent omission of it altogether, the medal had really been brought within the capacity of the coining press.

It required only a slight improvement of the machine to enable it to usurp full control over the production of the medal. That necessary improvement was made about the year 1506 by Gambello of the Venetian mint. Almost a half century before, Enzola, also a Venetian medallist, had tried the coining press, but at that time the process found no favor among artists.

This mechanical advance, which was undoubtedly of great service to the regular operations of the mint, proved a distinct detriment to the medal as a work of art. The coining press made the now evident defects of the medal its permanent characteristics, and rendered impossible the recovery of that monumental style which was the glory of the earlier cast pieces. The medal might

never have regained the grand style of Pisanello, de Pasti and Marescotti, but once in the thralldom of the press, such restoration was impossible, until at least the undreamed of hydraulic press of late years was invented. The advantage which the process of striking offered was the very questionable one of facilitating their manufacture in large numbers, the well-known error of sacrificing quality to quantity.

It must not be inferred that the change to the process of striking was sudden and complete. On the contrary, the usurpations of the machine were slow, and for many years the two processes were in common use at the same time. Gradually, however, as taste declined and the medal became more and more employed in the petty business of noting unnoteworthy events, such as very trivial events in the lives and affairs of royal families and the unusual achievements of unimportant people, a use for which a large number of copies is always demanded, then it was the struck medal finally became the usual thing.

It is not possible to take up here the early struck medal, although that was the intention at the beginning. It was perhaps an unwise distribution of the subject and the material that has thus excluded this later phase of it, but, on the other hand, further discussion would only produce reiterations of what has been often reiterated before, unless the scope of this study should be considerably widened. The chief omission resulting from this abrupt termination is of the activities of the Papal Mint in Rome. This mint became the center of such medallic art as still survived in the latter part of the Sixteenth and in the Seventeenth Centuries. The ablest artists of Italy were drawn to its service, so that the works there produced are really representative of the development or declension of the art throughout Italy and Europe. These artists have left us many medals of the Popes with portraits that are faithful if not superior. The general character of these medals, as well as those produced elsewhere in Europe, is well known and can be omitted from this brief study. To present one or two of them as characteristic specimens of all would be an easy task; but to know all would not be worth even so little effort, to the student of the medal as a branch of art. The manner of the goldsmith and of the die-engraver had done its worst. And what these two had failed to do at Rome and elsewhere, servile imitating and copying of the antique brought about at Milan and other cities of the north.

In later years artists of better training have found the medal worthy their attention, and the result has been improvement of the medal itself and, more important still, the creation of a better taste. It is this condition that makes the works of the early masters so interesting.

